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AUTHOR Thermer, Clifford E.
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ABSTRACT

Authentic assessment differs from traditional paper-and-pencil assessment in that it is designed to reflect students' "real world" experience. Authentic assessments may assume a variety of forms (including demonstrations, oral interviews/presentations, simulations, self-assessments, and peer/instructor evaluations); however, their focus is always on evaluating learners' mastery and performance of training objectives rather than on degree of compliance or conformity. Portfolios are considered a form of authentic assessment because they examine students' performance in naturalistic settings over time by including student materials documenting those students' learning experiences in a variety of challenges during training. The usefulness of portfolios as a tool for authentic assessment may be seen through an examination of the use of portfolios in the 2-week experiential training program completed by new recruits of the Connecticut State Police. The experiential training program, which takes place at the culmination of 26 weeks of intense training, allows recruits to experience a myriad of situations that might be encountered in the field. The portfolio of materials developed by the recruits as they respond to those situations allows them to reflect on and gain insight into their own performance while also obtaining valuable feedback from their field training officers. (Contains five references.) (MN)

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The Portfolio Perspective: Authentic Assessment for Experiential Training

by Clifford E. Thermer

Abstract: This article describes the development and use of portfolios as an authentic assessment tool for the Connecticut State Police Experiential Training Program. It describes how trainees can learn critical thinking and decision making through the use of portfolios, while allowing instructors to assess the cognitive and skill learning that takes place in the Academy, which standardized tests can not assess.

Authentic assessment is a term which describes the process of evaluating a learner's original piece of work or completed task, arrived at based upon a previously acquired body of knowledge, and demonstrated in a concrete form. Authentic assessments offer a more qualitative form of evaluation than paper and pencil tests. In a review of authentic assessments, Kerka (1995) explains that "assessments are authentic when they have meaning in themselves - when the learning they measure has value beyond the classroom and is meaningful to the learner." They differ from traditional paper and pencil tests in that they are designed to reflect "real world" experiences of the student. They encompass a wide variety of techniques while focusing on evaluating a learner's mastery and performance of a training objective, rather than the degree of compliance or conformity. These techniques may take some of the following forms: demonstrations; oral interviews and presentations; simulations or experiential training; role plays; self-assessment exercises using reflective writing, checklists, or credo statements; and peer or instructor evaluations, either of a formal or informal nature.

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Portfolios are considered to be a form of authentic assessment "because they are used to examine student performance in a naturalistic setting over time" (Meyer, 1992). They typically include a collection of student materials documenting their learning experiences in a variety of challenges during training. A portfolio is not a journal, but it can include one. It is rich with trainee work products such as reports, photographs, evaluations, etc. as well as instructor and peer observations and assessments.

Use of Portfolios as an Authentic Assessment

The use of portfolios to document key learning experiences of police recruits reflects their demonstration of the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) not capable of being assessed by exams. Many KSAOs of law enforcement call for understanding and an ability to interact within a diverse society. How do we, as trainers, measure certain seemingly intangible abilities of new officers like interpersonal skills? We know these abilities are necessary for an officer, however, unlike reading and writing, these other skills are more difficult to assess. In many organizations, recruit and in-service training programs are expanding these areas of the curriculum. A portfolio, which includes examples of interpersonal situations and how well they were handled, is an alternative method of assessment.

Much of an officer's job requires him or her to think critically, draw conclusions and make decisions. Due to their reflective problem-solving nature, portfolios can assist the training process in developing the trainees critical thinking and decision making capacities. Guillaume and Yopp (1995), writing about student teachers, note that

"students' portfolios allow us to glimpse our progress in addressing our department's mission of preparing humane, informed decision makers who are life-long learners, reflective practitioners, and change agents." As law enforcement trainers, aren't these also desirable goals in training officers for service in today's society?

Authentic Assessment in Its Existing Form

Another form of authentic assessment, maybe the oldest, is the apprenticeship. Here, knowledge, skills and abilities are honed under the watchful eye of an expert practitioner. Law enforcement has a form of apprenticeship, commonly referred to as the "Field Training Officer (F.T.O.) Program," which has appeared in a variety of forms across the country. The F.T.O program usually follows some traditional academy training, where instructors impart the knowledge of law enforcement procedures and attempt to develop the necessary skills of trainees to handle those "real world" situations they will experience in the field.

For the Connecticut State Police, the indoctrination and academics of training occur under the umbrella of a para-military atmosphere complete with uniforms, polished brass, intense discipline, rigorous physical training and long days. There is a heavy emphasis on traditional academics related to law enforcement in the academy, but much less emphasis on having trainees reflect upon their actual experiences in training and apprenticeship. Our traditional academic environment may not be sufficient for teaching the skills and imparting the knowledge and sensitivity base for a recruit to function competently as a law enforcement officer in these times.

Traditional Training and Assessment

A challenge - for a typical recruit - comes in the transition process from academy recruit to field practitioner. Some who enter the field will experience difficulties in performing the job in spite of the fact that they have demonstrated a minimum retention of 70% on written exams. This percentile reflects the minimal achievement required on written exams that take the form of multiple choice, true-false and fill-in questions. Taking theory and putting it into practice is not necessarily a natural progression for the recruit who performed satisfactorily in the academy environment. The notion has long been held in the field that a police officer's best teacher is his or her experience. The theory learned by a recruit in the Academy sometimes doesn't begin to make connections until the officer is out in the field "doing the job"; i.e. investigating accidents, solving crimes, and dealing with the public.

In the traditional training environment, the instructor's responsibility is to present material from the curriculum, in the allotted time frame, that comprises the necessary information for the recruit to possess. Tests of the recruits' retention level alone does not assess what they can perform in the field. Law enforcement is generally a task-orientated occupation. Skilled performance is the critical factor in law enforcement.

During training, practical skill exercises are mixed into the classroom environment in an attempt to complement and reinforce what has been taught in each learning unit. However, even with such exercises, there is no certain way of evaluating what skill level the recruit has attained in the classroom that he or she will apply in the

field. Often, practical simulations are merely paper exercises, such as investigating an accident from a written scenario. Written examinations concerning domestic incident interventions may not accurately assess the recruit's ability to intervene effectively in an actual dispute.

Experiential Training

In an attempt to address the trainee's transition from the academy to a field assignment, the Connecticut State Police developed a two week experiential training program which concentrates on the performance orientation of law enforcement. Specifically, the program applies the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics learned in the classroom to controlled, interactive situations, created for the purpose of evaluating what the recruits have assimilated during training (Thermer, 1995). Spady (1988) noted that "learning occurs in settings, and settings add their own conditions and challenges for demonstrations." This experiential program seeks to prepare the new recruits for their transition from protected academy training to a field role where their actions hold consequences, mistakes can be costly and there are few opportunities for correction after the fact.

The experiential training program, which takes place at the culmination of 26 weeks of intense training, is designed to allow recruits to experience a myriad of situations which they might encounter in the field and follow them through to

conclusion, including the reporting of their actions on paper. Spady (1988), in describing a tenet of outcome based education, wrote:

> ... outcomes are culminating demonstrations of significant bodies of learning. Culmination here means "at the end" when all of the previous learning can be synthesized and applied in a final demonstration. This final demonstration can only be achieved if the student has been prepared early for the challenge it represents.

This final demonstration, however, needs to be assessed. This is where the authentic assessment comes into play in the form of a portfolio.

Using A Portfolio for Assessment and Learning

As each experiential training activity is completed, field training officers (FTOs), brought in from the field for this program, evaluate the performance of the recruits based on a specific task list developed for that particular situation. The task list reflects the relevant performance objectives taught in the classroom. The FTO then reviews the recruits' performance and discusses both the acceptable and unacceptable performances noted. The recruits, then, must document the incident in detail utilizing the agency's reporting system.

It is during this documentation phase that recruits are given the opportunity to reflect on the proceedings of the scenario and to offer their own insight into their performance in light of their experience and the feedback of the FTO. They examine their actions, alternative actions and related consequences and how other choices may have had different results. Although self-assessment probably goes on in the mind of every officer, consciously or unconsciously, at some point following an incident, we

want to reinforce this critical thinking as a deliberate learning tool. The process and results of that critical thinking are then encouraged to be documented as an addendum to their "official" report of the incident. This reflective thinking is important to learning and facilitates a transference perspective of learning where lessons learned here can be called upon in other situations.

All reports, reflective addendums, and FTO evaluations are included in the portfolio. At the end of the two weeks of experiential training, recruits can observe the learning process that they documented by their own hand, and reflect upon their own words. Instructors also have the benefit of observing the recruits' critical thinking development in the learning process.

Because portfolios are highly individualized, research has not yet devised a universal grading system for them, although instructors can devise their own grading assessment if it is deemed necessary. There is published material and several texts concerning the use and development of portfolios, however, trainers and educators have not yet decided on exactly what defines a portfolio. Suffice it to say that whatever best demonstrates the reflective thinking and long term learning of a trainee may be appropriate content of a trainee portfolio.

We will continue to develop our experiential training curriculum in conjunction with an authentic assessment model using the portfolio. The use of this assessment tool earlier in our training process is being explored in our best efforts to enhance law enforcement training for our time.

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